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To cite this article: Yngve Antonsen , Odd Arne Thunberg & Tom Tiller (2020): Too rich to learn – when action researchers work against senior management and their use of performance management, Educational Action Research, DOI: [10.1080/09650792.2020.1805635](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1805635)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1805635>



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Published online: 17 Aug 2020.



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Too rich to learn – when action researchers work against senior management and their use of performance management

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ABSTRACT

We analyse and self-reflect on an action research project conducted in a financial organisation twelve years ago. The research question was: What are the challenges of initiating an action research project in a financial organisation with top-down control that uses the Balanced Scorecard? The data came from action learning seminars with line managers, observations, interviews, and meetings in a Norwegian bank (Bank) with approximately 800 employees. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. This study's findings indicate that performance management and top-down senior management control may unintentionally hinder the possibilities for proceeding with action research projects. The researchers lacked open communication with senior management about the purpose of the project, and the managers who participated in the action learning found it difficult to explain to colleagues and senior management what they learned from the processes. Action research did not fit with the Bank's strategic use of performance management. The project may have increased the stress on the line managers as we identified problems without providing the opportunity to make real changes in their organisation. As a result, we determined that action researchers should be cautious in initiating action research without concrete support, active participation and 'common ground' dialogues with senior management.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 January 2020

Accepted 10 June 2020

KEYWORDS

Action research; action learning; performance management; the balanced scorecard; financial organisation

Introduction

In this article, we, as educational researchers, analyse and reflect on an action research project conducted in a financial organisation in Norway twelve years ago. A primary goal of the project was to encourage departmental line managers to challenge their own attitudes through action learning in order to improve the overall practice of the bank and reduce absenteeism from sickness. The ultimate goal of the project was to develop the bank as a learning-driven organisation in accordance with the bank's stated strategy. The project was in accordance with action research theory aiming to improve praxis in organisations using the experiences and reflections of participants. The paradigm for action research has historically been to promote knowledge through participants' involvement in development processes (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Action research is an

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established strategy for working with organisational development, for example, within schools (Carr and Kemmis 1986), the health sector (Pedler 2012) and in sustainable development (Zuber-Skerritt 2012). However, action research projects, in general, have failed to contribute to larger social and organisational changes, since the projects are organised as case by case interventions (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003).

There is lack of research investigating action research projects in financial organisations. This has resulted in a need for research that investigates the role of senior management in initiating and supporting action research projects. Senior management has the responsibility for making strategical and operative day-to-day business decisions within an organisation. In addition, initiating action research projects that involve line managers and employees requires the support of senior management to implement new ideas and solutions in practice (Ekman Philips and Huzzard 2007). Empirical results from a study of an investment bank revealed that experimental learning and empowerment are also needed in the financial sector to promote critical thinking (Michel 2007). However, in financial organisations, trends that began around 2000 and still exist have increased the use of performance management systems (Brown et al. 2019), such as the Balanced Scorecard (BSC). These strengthen top-down control because senior management can use them to increase monitoring efficiency and the handling of day-to-day business in the organisation (Nørreklit 2003). Strengthening top-down control may, however, reduce the opportunities for line managers and employees to learn from their experiences (Antonsen 2014). In this context, we investigated the following research question: What are the challenges of initiating an action research project in a financial organisation with top-down control that uses the BSC?

The structure of the article is as follows. Firstly, we present literature concerning action research, action learning, performance management and the BSC in financial organisations. Secondly, we present the case bank (Bank) and give an account of the methods used. The third part of the article presents the results. The fourth discusses the results and presents our conclusions.

Literature

Action research and action learning

Action research always entails critical reflection: learning from experience (action) through investigating and trying to understand (research) the change process, thinking critically about and conceptualizing what worked, what did not work, how or how not, and why or why not, and identifying what can be done better on the basis of this learning. (Zuber-Skerritt 2018, 516)

Researchers participate in action research as both subjects and objects with the explicit ambition of bringing improvement through the study (Carr and Kemmis 1986). The role of researchers includes facilitating reflection processes for participants with the goal of conceptualising and generalising actions (Zuber-Skerritt 2018). Conceptualising that describes and captures experiences and actions from an organisation offers new possibilities for creating new actions (Pålshaugen 2001). Reflection involves thinking critically and creatively about the connection between our actions and their consequences (Argyris and Schön 1996). Thus, action research promotes examining situations to confirm or

disconfirm if our reflections and generalisations were right. If the evidence is not confirming, we must then reanalyse our concrete experiences and propose new actions to scrutinise (Altricher et al. 2002).

The ambition of action research from an emancipatory organisational perspective is about reducing inequality and suppression between workers and management. Action researchers (Carr and Kemmis 1986) have found support for their work in Habermas's (1990) critical theory, which uses a dialectic view of rationality. Social research should investigate and change power relations and special interests, as society is viewed as changeable (Kemmis 2001). Gustavsen (2001) argued that the Habermas's theory is also critical of action research, noting that emancipation processes should start with theory, not action. Despite this critique, Gustavsen (2001) suggested that action researchers should use theory and reflection to discuss how we can communicate about possible changes in organisations.

The theory of action learning is helpful for understanding and promoting action research (Zuber-Skerritt 2018). Action learning involves four steps – ranging from loose talk to critical reflection. Learning can start on all levels in this theoretical model, and it is possible to go up, down or even skip steps in the process. An explanation of the steps follows:

- (1) Reflexivity is part of professional work and happens in action or concurrent with individual action-reflection after action (Schön 1991). The first step in action learning is to express and share experiences verbally between participants.
- (2) The second step is to block sort, categorise and systemise the experiences through discussions with participants to identify main patterns in the organisation. Dialogue and discussions amongst the group members contribute to systemizing the experiences (Tiller and Gedda 2017). Systemising is necessary to avoid an experience talk loop.
- (3) The third step involves introducing theories and concepts to analyse experiences and to uncover challenges, patterns, power relations or social differences (Tiller and Gedda 2017). This part of the process has the goal of creating a deeper understanding of the experiences and practices in the organisation and determining the potential for new actions.
- (4) Critical reflection can be stimulated by action learning (Vince et al. 2018). Critical reflection involves trying to 'uncover and investigate our paradigmatic, prescriptive and causal assumptions that inform how we practice' (Brookfield 2009, 126). Therefore, critical reflection is about inquiring into our actions, trying to understand why we act, and to identify the consequences of our actions. Critical reflection will require analysing and discussing power structures relating to how they influence our actions. The results of critical reflection may contribute to new solutions to problems, or on the contrary, reveal paradoxes, conflicts and problems that cannot be solved (Vince et al. 2018).

The results of work with action learning vary from continuing with established practices to adopting new and better actions (Vince et al. 2018). To succeed with action research in organisations, you also need people who accept the responsibility for taking action on the concrete task or problem they have identified. Previous research has revealed challenges

in promoting action research with a focus on empowerment for employees in organisations, for example, in the probation services in the UK (Gibbs 1999). According to Vince (2002), there appear to be three major constraints to learning effectively from reflection in organisations: 1) insufficient time for reflection, 2) insufficient motivation to learn from reflection on significant working life moments/encounters and 3) insufficient power to implement new strategies, ideas or propositions to further improve performance.

BSC in financial organisations

Modern senior policies and performance management systems, such as the BSC, use information and communications technology (ICT) to help senior management implement and monitor the production of line managers and employees (Kaplan and Norton 1996). The BSC was developed through action research (Kaplan 1998) as a performance management system that measures four balanced perspectives: financial, customers, internal business process and learning and growth. The motivation and rationality behind the system are directed toward making sure that the top-down strategic plan directly influences how work tasks are performed and rewarded within the organisation (Kaplan and Norton 1996). The senior managers can, for example, set targets for each department and measure all tasks and results in the BSC. Research revealed that the BSC makes it possible for senior management to lead the organisation from a distance, using orders and performance measurement (Nørreklit 2003). Using such systems, the formal control of the senior managers is strengthened because they decide the indicators related to organisational strategy (Nørreklit 2003). The systems are based on an economic rationality, and senior management has the best knowledge to plan the strategic and operative decisions of the organisation.

Performance management systems have been criticised for creating rules, procedures, and rigidity in how employees in the organisation operate (Antonsen 2014). Pedler (2012) also highlighted the challenges of hierarchical models of organising, as leaders focus on accountability and responsibility to tackle evolving problems which can hinder the development of creative and self-determining employees. Hackman and Wageman (2004) also argued, based on their empirical study of teamwork, that the possibilities to promote team effectiveness amongst line managers and employees are reduced when work processes are standardised, constrained, individualised, and controlled. Such an argument is in line with Argyris and Schön (1996) who concluded that reflection without opportunities to change practices will provide few learning gains for employees and the organisation. Thus, it is to be expected that performance management that promotes top-down work routines reduces subordinates' options for participating in decisions and improvements affecting their own work.

This is the contradiction: action researchers establish processes aiming for empowerment and reflection, while senior management policies, such as the BSC, may strengthen top-down control by providing employees with rigid routines and standardised orders.

Methods

The case

The case under consideration here is a Norwegian bank (Bank). In all rankings of working life, Norway scores at the top in socio-economic factors, such as democracy, education,

and competence development. The bank provided both commercial and personal banking services, had high profits and enjoyed a top international 'A' Fitch rating. The Bank was a local actor in a defined regional area, with more than 800 employees located in more than 80 local departments of varying sizes. Competition had been increasing as customers' became less loyal and more price-minded. Educational qualifications were increased for the remaining employees as new internet banking technology had contributed to continuing development processes and downsizing of their workforce.

The Bank's rhetoric used in the strategic planning documents included concepts such as 'learning', 'team work' and 'learning organisation'. During the period of the project, the Bank's strategy highlighted building long-term, high-quality customer relations based on relationships and knowledge. In their work, line managers and advisors aimed to increase the sale of all products (loans, insurance, deposits, pension, credit cards and unit trusts) to more customers. However, according to surveys, the Bank had challenges in customer satisfaction and also experienced challenges with high turnover amongst line managers.

Financial organisations are governed by regulations and laws that could challenge the intent of doing an action research project. In the second year of the project, the 2008 financial crisis occurred. As a result of the crisis, Norwegian authorities required that all financial advisors obtain a national ethical certification through an internet-based learning system. The Bank gave all its new employees special training in laws, routines, and systems in their own training centre. The international and national laws specify routines to prevent new failures, fraud, and criminality. The new institutional requirements and laws made it necessary for line managers and advisors in financial organisations to update their knowledge and routines in order to fulfil these new requirements.

The action researchers, the authors of this paper, collected and analysed the qualitative material over a four-year period from 2007 to 2011. The researchers contributed theory, concepts, and feedback during discussions held in seminar sessions. We also wrote four concise reports, which were critical of several organizational aspects, and submitted these to the board of the Bank. However, after 2009, they did not ask us for any more reports. We also wrote four international journal articles about empowerment, learning and the use of the BSC in the Bank. These previous empirical articles did not thematise nor analyse the action research processes in the project. The material for this article was analysed again in 2012, and reanalysed in 2019. The writing of this article, so many years after the project was finished, made it easier for us to view the project critically. We established a retrospective flashback.

In the next section, we present the data collection.

Project group meetings

The human resources (HR) department had the responsibility to lead the project within the Bank, and a project group was established. The members of the project group were the senior director of the HR department, the HR manager, and the manager of the Bank's internal training centre.¹ The researchers arranged four annual meetings with the project group. On the meeting agenda were a) planning and evaluation of the project, b) seminars, and c) the involvement of five departments. We collected data from the meetings by writing notes, then expanding these into extensive summaries

shortly after the meetings, using our memories and the notes. We also taped all of the meetings and transcribed a meeting that we deemed important for the data collection.

Seminars

Originally, 35 line managers volunteered to attend four action research seminars every year over the course of the project. In practice, we arranged eight, two-day seminars in which an average of 10 line managers, two staff managers and the HR director participated. We invited international researchers to give lectures and facilitate discussions on different action learning topics on the first day of the seminar.

On day two of the seminars, we introduced action learning theories to the participants and led discussions and analysis of the Bank's learning challenges. The research team also initiated and lead discussions about how the line managers could use the theories individually in their departments and, potentially, throughout the entire Bank. The seminars produced valuable data about management and learning in the Bank as the participants contributed reflections and comments in both the theory presentations and discussions. The participants discussed their ideas and experiences with each other, as well as with the researchers.

Departments' data

We introduced and organised action learning for line managers and advisors in seminars in the Bank's five largest local departments. In total, we arranged eleven two-hour seminars focused on action learning in these departments. We first presented short lectures then the participants solved group tasks about values and learning in the department. We took notes during the meetings and wrote extensive summaries shortly after. Two of the researchers also attended a total of 30 meetings and learning activities in these five departments over a two-year period, sometimes together, sometimes separately. We wrote entries during the meetings and extensive summaries shortly afterwards.

Team meetings data

To gain further insights into the learning processes and outcomes in the Bank's organisation, one researcher (YA), observed 15 team meetings which were held once a week in a business department. He introduced a simple action learning tool in the meetings whereby the advisors told the others about a learning experience from the previous week. The researcher took notes during the meetings and expanded them into extensive summaries afterwards. It was not possible to tape the meetings because of sensitive business discussions.

Interview data

Thirty-two customer advisors and eight line managers were interviewed about management and learning in the Bank. Informants of various ages, lengths of service and of both genders from were randomly selected from five branches of the bank. In these 30–60-

minute interviews, we used a semi-structured interview guide to allow the researcher to let the interview flow and follow up leads and information. This enabled us to explore the management and learning of customers, colleagues, and the Bank, in general. We transcribed all the interviews.

Overall, a positive level of trust and interaction amongst the project group members, line managers, advisors and researchers led to a rich set of empirical data. However, a limitation in our qualitative data analysis was that we did not transcribe data from all meetings and seminars due to the quantity of the material gathered. An extensive body of material for analysing is a general challenge in case studies (Yin 2009). The two PhD students involved in the project selected the material for transcription based on the discussion themes in the meetings and focus groups. We transcribed all the material that we deemed important for understanding senior management strategy, learning and action research in the Bank.

Analysis

Two of the researchers first used NVivo data analysis software to organise and code the varied qualitative data to determine how the informants understood, agreed, and disagreed about strategies, management and learning in the Bank. We analysed the material by means of thematic analysis, aiming to capture insights into meanings or themes from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Firstly, we used open coding to group similar statements into categories using the informants' own concepts and statements (Bazeley 2007). To qualify as a code, the statements had to be used frequently and explain actions and processes that more than one informant found important (Braun and Clarke 2006). After the initial process, we read and coded field notes, memos and researcher reflections to further generate ideas in the process of categorising and comparing the codes.

Two researchers discussed and 'played' with the codes to find an explanatory matrix of categories. We used a large whiteboard as a visual tool for interpreting the relation amongst the categories. Afterwards, we used the matrix of categories as a starting point to sort categories at greater levels of abstraction to reveal relationships amongst the categories. Using NVivo, we built a tree data structure to explain the connection amongst the categories. The sorting verified that the senior management strategies played a significant role in the challenges of initiating action research in the project. To develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding, the first author recoded the existing categories that captured the senior management strategy and action research by reviewing the theme (Braun and Clarke 2006) and building a new open coding structure. Afterwards, he reconceptualised how the new categories related to each other by 'experimenting' with the codes in NVivo and building a new tree structure. The new coding provided further insight from the informants' statements about the project.

Next, all the researchers reflected on the project self-critically and discussed the analysis. The three researchers found consensus in discussions about the findings in the qualitative material from the project, and this process strengthened reliability. Empirical data from case studies are relevant for developing analytical generalisations (Yin 2009). By giving a detailed description of this specific case and the context, we want to enable others to transfer the findings to similar social settings and strengthen its validity (Flyvbjerg 2006). However, a limitation of our study is that we lack data about

the project from senior management, as they did not attend the seminars, meetings, or interviews.

Results

Lack of communication with senior management

As researchers, we had reason to believe that the senior management with the responsibility for the strategic decisions in the Bank was heavily involved in the decision to fund the four-year action research project. However, it transpired that the funding of six million Nkr for the project came from the Bank's donations fund. The bank is obliged to use a certain percentage of their profits on local projects through this fund, and it has its own board. Internally, the project was viewed by the Bank as an HR project. During the project, we found that the two participating HR managers had no influence over strategic business decision-making or the use of the BSC in the Bank; hence, they did not operate as part of the senior management team. As action researchers, we repeatedly experienced and expressed to the participating members that we lacked dialogue with the senior management. We wanted communication with the senior management to improve the strategy of the project and to connect action research with other development projects or the Bank's induction programme for new employees. However, the Bank did not include us in its ongoing projects or internal learning programmes.

Emotion and empowerment focus

The project began with an open public conference with attendance from the Bank and other private and public organisations in the region. The researchers' argument was that freeing up time for line managers and employees to reflect in the workplace could reduce burnout and absenteeism amongst employees. Examples were presented from a Swedish municipality where school leaders and social workers had used reflection to identify positive experiences from their work; this motivated them to do further work and also substantially reduced absenteeism.

The planning of the action research project involved arranging four two-day action learning seminars for line managers each year. The researchers were free to plan the seminars without much input from the Bank and choose an emotional focus; this was intended to promote positive follow-up interaction by the line managers in regard to social support, task monitoring and problem-solving. In the pivotal first year of the project, we strengthened the impact of the seminars by inviting external researchers who supported our vision to participate. During seminar two, we focused on empowerment and talked about how shame reduces self-confidence and decreases willingness to act and take initiative. Pride achieves the opposite; it increases the ability to act and the will to take action (Askheim and Starrin 2007).

We also initiated action learning seminars in five of the largest departments of the bank. Building on theories about empowerment and positive psychology, the first action learning task for line managers and advisors in these seminars was to identify classical victim stories and success stories in the organisation. The larger perspective was to focus on the positive stories and to do more of what works to improve the organisation. Our use

of external researchers, their lectures and discussions, was new and different to what the line managers had experienced in their daily Bank work, but their oral response to this was positive.

Lack of senior management support terminates the seminars

After only two seminars and just a couple of months into the project, the line managers began to experience problems in being able to attend the two-day action research seminars. In fact, about eight of them were unable to attend the second seminar because senior management ordered them to deliver new reports the day after the seminar. Senior management also obliged them to attend regional meetings or other local learning projects, making it impossible for them to participate in the action research project. As one line manager noted:

If the department is planning to reduce the workforce by two employees, this makes it difficult for me to leave work and go to the university for two days. (Line manager in a seminar)

The researchers also experienced that, after a couple of seminars, three of the participating departments cancelled their participation. All the line managers found it difficult to set aside time for the project, and they questioned senior management's support for it. They particularly wanted senior management to participate in the project so it could become relevant to their strategic work. The action researchers reported the challenges the line managers faced, both orally to the project group and in two written reports to senior management. The researchers wanted management to support the project by requesting that line managers attend the seminars, and in the reports, they suggested ways to free up line managers' time so they could participate. The researchers also asked the Bank to provide specific dates for the seminars to avoid scheduling conflicts. However, the project group, including the Bank's HR manager, wanted participation in the seminars to remain voluntary; therefore, participation continued to decline.

The quotations from the HR managers and the line managers in [Table 1](#) reveal their different strategies for increasing line managers' attendance at the seminars.

The quotations and observations revealed that the project group did not want to order the line managers to participate in the project, even though they knew this would increase attendance. The project group was supportive in their rhetoric, but not in their actions. All of the participating line managers said they were accustomed to taking directions from the senior management; in their experience, the senior managers are the drivers of change in the Bank. The data revealed that the line managers had to respond unquestioningly to the demands and expectations of senior management. Because of the lack of senior management participation or any direct instructions, the line managers did not perceive their attendance in the project and the discussions in seminars as significant for the development of the Bank. As most line managers did not prioritise attending the seminars, we had to terminate the two-day seminars strategy after two years. For line managers on the outskirts of the region, the travel distance of approximately 750 km from the university would naturally be an obstacle to attending seminars. Consequently, our plan of doing two seminars over two days each semester may have been too ambitious.

Table 1. Strategies for encouraging the line managers to attend seminars.

<i>The HR managers' strategy for encouraging line managers to attend seminars</i>	<i>Line managers' view of project without the support of senior management</i>
<p>My hypothesis is that the line managers have not understood the essence of the project if they withdraw. Our motivation is a wish to change our business culture to reflect that we actually dare to learn from our mistakes. I am uncertain about what is wise to do, but certain about what is stupid. That we request them to meet, because then everybody will show up. It is a clear there is a hierarchical management culture in the organization. (HR manager in a project meeting)</p> <p>If the senior management does not attend, then the line managers drop out. You have in a short time identified a challenge as we are not as willing to participate in learning as we thought. The line managers wish about getting signals from senior management for this project is maybe a paradox. We have to mirror learning against the strategic narrative in the bank about us being a learning organization. Either you believe in this strategy or you just do what the senior management wants. The senior management does not have the time to sit with line managers and reflect all the time. (HR manager)</p>	<p>I have been in such projects before, and if senior management does not participate, then it ends up with no results. (Line manager in a seminar)</p> <p>The theory is good, and we can use it individually in our daily work as line managers. But, we must use this knowledge practically in the whole organization. (Line manager in a seminar)</p>

Action learning can be difficult and time-consuming to grasp and communicate to others

During the seminars which took place, action researchers, HR managers and line managers analysed challenges and possibilities for line managers' work together. The line managers and the HR managers generally reported that attending the seminars was interesting and contributed to their personal growth as managers. The line managers told us that discussions in seminars based on experiences and theory with colleagues added new personal insights about management, motivation and learning in the organisation. The statements quoted in [Table 2](#) however, reveal that the participants expressed difficulties in understanding and communicating the purpose of action learning, especially in the beginning.

The statements by the HR managers and line managers indicated that the Bank lacked a culture of reflection due to its established training traditions and demand for efficiency. Line managers said they had little time for reflection, either alone or collectively, during their hectic working days. It took time for the participants to grasp the relevance of action learning, here communicated as reflection; however, the presentations, discussions and reflections with researchers and their colleagues in seminars gave the line managers insight into action learning and its value for learning in the Bank. The participating line managers talked positively about using the theories of action learning to develop their own department. However, they and the HR managers, described difficulties in informing other colleagues and employees about the project and the value of using action learning to reflect on their practices. The line managers reported that colleagues who did not participate in the seminars did not understand or show interest in what was discussed.

Table 2. Action learning can be difficult and time-consuming to grasp and communicate to others.

HR managers	Line managers
<p>A soft spot in our organization is our own learning. We are used to being trained and we are missing a culture for reflection. To reflect on our own is not easy. (HR manager in a seminar)</p> <p>I wonder where we are going in this project and how much work it requires. There is high pressure for efficiency in the bank. (HR manager)</p>	<p>What was useful in this seminar? I have been uncertain about the goal and value of this project. Reflection starts to be useful for me now. (Line manager in a seminar)</p> <p>We do not take time to reflect. We just jump straight into action. Maybe we have to use time to analyse new things, words and actions, time to reflect. (Line manager in a seminar)</p> <p>It is a practice in itself making time for reflection. I do not have time during my working day to think about fundamental practices. Financial estimates with numbers are very easy, and human relations and learning are the most challenging tasks during work. (Line manager in a seminar)</p>

Action researchers supporting critical line managers against top-down control and BSC

The line managers and the researchers expressed frustration when, through action learning, we identified that the ideas of empowerment, reflection, and autonomy, intrinsic to action research, did not correspond with the top-down senior management policies and the use of the BSC. The researchers encouraged the line managers to use the authority they had in their departments to introduce action learning to their employees. The discussions in the seminars and departments resulted in a focus on how the participating line managers could motivate and help their employees by implementing empowerment and action learning. The HR managers, however, criticised the researchers for this strategy. The statements recorded in the seminars and project group meetings revealed the challenge of promoting action research and action learning faced by both researchers and line managers in the Bank.

The statements revealed that the HR managers were critical of the researchers for their support of the line managers, although we helped them by providing analysis and concepts for their work. The HR managers found that the line managers used the ideas and arguments from action learning against senior management. The statements in [Table 3](#) also indicated that the researchers supported the line managers and encouraged them to oppose senior management's strategies and their intensive use of performance management. The reflections completed during the project created a potential for new actions in the line managers' handling of their employees. The initiated action research project demanded a more personal follow-up of each employee by the line managers. The line managers facilitated reflective learning for their advisors to learn from their handling of customers, and they expressed increased well-being in the department. The line managers and advisors told us that they were motivated by serving customers and not by performance measurement.

The line managers in the project were expected to take a solid leadership role by both the senior management and by the action researchers. However, as the possibilities for improving practice by empowering employees was the opposite of the senior management strategy, the organisation did not value line managers who came up with their own ideas based on action learning. Equally, line managers or researchers who were critical of

Table 3. Action researchers supporting critical line managers against top-down control and BSC.

HR managers' criticisms of action researchers	Action research promoting critical thinking of line managers
<p>If the researcher is sitting and listening to a team that says, 'Now you should listen to how badly we are treated', and then the researcher says, 'Hmm, interesting. Tell me more', that means he agrees with us as employees. As a researcher, you confirm that you understand and want them to tell you more. In addition, the informants think that you agree with them. It is not enough to do supportive research; you have to make them responsible as well. (HR manager in a project group meeting) The participating line managers who use the concepts from your seminars tell me how easy it is to be victimised in our organisation because of strong senior management control. And, that they sit down with their employees and build opposition strategies (HR manager in a project group meeting).</p>	<p>We are getting instructions, and then it is so that, if you are a good leader, you don't let these instructions just pass, but you try to do something with them. As we discussed yesterday, you have to prioritise away some of the instructions. (Line manager in a seminar) What you're saying is that we should use ten seconds extra for seeing and following up with our employees (be obedient). Such possibilities push extra responsibility down on me, asking me to dare to be an individual, when our system says we should be relatively collective. (Line manager in a seminar)</p>

the performance management in the organisation did not receive support. This may explain why line managers quit attending seminars that promoted discussions about critical reflection to improve practice. Several of the participating line managers also quit the Bank sometime later for reasons unknown, while others changed positions.

In sum, we may have increased the cross-pressure between senior managements' demands on line managers and their handling of their advisors. However, as researchers, we opposed becoming an instrument for senior management and their business strategy. The researchers' first two papers discussed possibilities for line managers to use empowerment strategies in leading their employees. The papers were criticised in the project group because they took the view of the line managers and promoted ideas and values from action research.

Discussion

Our findings revealed that even securing funding from an organisation is not enough to secure legitimacy for action research and participation within the organisation. According to Zuber-Skerritt (2012, 217–8), there is a need for symmetrical communication and commitment amongst members to pursue action research. The absence of senior management in this action research project reduced participation from line managers and the possibilities to contribute to strategic changes and establish action learning for the whole organisation. These findings correlated with what Vince (2002) described as barriers to reflective learning.

Lack of mutual goals, understanding and dialogue between senior management and action researchers led to unexpected difficulties in carrying out the action research project. As researchers, we may have inadvertently increased the understanding and communication gap by focusing on empowerment and emotions in the early phase of the project, as this theme was rather alternative to the senior management's rational use of the BSC. Perhaps, this was particularly the case because the critical reflection from the action research contributed to critiques from both researchers and line managers directed

against the senior management. The researchers came to be considered a threat to the established organisation, strategy, and power structures in the Bank.

The lack of senior management support and communication resulted in a strategy and values mismatch between action research as an empowerment strategy for improvement and the Bank's top-down performance management strategy. As researchers, we could possibly have been more open-minded in our communication with senior management. Action researchers, senior management, and line managers represented different positions, values, priorities and cultures, and we, as researchers, failed to set aside enough time to discuss and integrate important differences amongst the stakeholders in the project, a typical failure also found in transdisciplinary research (Fam and O'Rourke [In press](#); Stokols 2006). As action researchers, we were openly critical about the Bank's learning systems, which was developed for control and documentation of, for example, its ethical standards. However, we should perhaps have been more explorative in trying to understand the Bank's learning system and the use of the BSC. Such appreciative dialogue could have also increased the possibilities for dialogue with senior management to create the 'common ground' required for action research.

Also, focus on emotions, empowerment and critical reflection amongst employees are demanding for senior management because such processes take time, have uncertain outcomes and cost time and money. External factors, such as the financial crisis, also influenced the project, as both senior management and line managers had to respond to the crisis. Such external economical limitations and changing environments are impossible to plan for in action research. However, in retrospective, there may have been some residual effect of the learning gained from the project as some of the participating line managers are still working at the Bank.

The project group was positive about the first action learning process of identifying success stories and victim stories from the line managers and employees. However, our analysis revealed that the success stories described working in accordance with the strategical manuals and performance management in the organisation. Hackman (2009) has criticised the theory of positive psychology for moving the focus from problems in organisational dynamics to looking at cognitive individual solutions. If workers do not succeed, it is easy to focus on the individual as the problem rather than investigating if there are systemic or organisational problems. This critique is relevant for action researchers promoting organisational development through empowerment. If we, as researchers, focus exclusively on the positive solutions and highlight only the best practices from the performance management perspective, then both line managers and researchers may fail to recognise, and may even reject, learning experiences and critical thinking in the organisation. As researchers, we then may end up being an instrument for senior management, thus actually working against the action research principles. Such processes might occur unconsciously, as the senior management is strongly influenced by systems dynamics. When researches promote uncritical solutions, the consequence may be increased pressure on individual line-managers and their employees who struggle to meet the fixed work demands from senior management.

The results also revealed the challenge in orally communicating the value and purpose of action research and action learning to people who do not participate in the processes. The line managers needed time to grasp the purpose of action research in the project. The senior management in the case lacked a deep understanding of the action research

project. The dilemma for researchers and participants is that words and scholarly verbal explanations come up short, and that actual participation in action learning is necessary to understand the concept and purpose of such actions. Once an alternative strategy to performance measurement is clearly explained and shown to be economically rational, you need senior management with a high level of reflective ability who will participate in action research to succeed with such projects.

Action researchers may take for granted that a process aiming to promote empowerment and action learning amongst line managers is positive for the participants (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003). Indeed, new insights and knowledge can create the potential for line managers to change their own management style. However, for line managers to change practices in their departments, they would need to defy the demands from senior management. Today's middle managers are expected to acknowledge each employee and motivate them, but the using action learning as a tool to achieve this requires room to manoeuvre, and that is challenged by top-down performance management systems. The dual rhetoric that demands both efficiency and seeing each employee as an individual becomes a paradox which line managers have to balance in their everyday activities (Renee Baptiste 2008).

Vince et al. (2018) have argued that such paradoxes create the potential for action learning. However, instead of creating a project that decreased the pressure on line managers work, we may actually have increased the pressure and stress by adding more possibilities and work tasks for them to handle. When the line managers saw this paradox, they expressed a feeling of disillusionment and exited the project. Moreover, we may have unintentionally increased the line managers' ambivalence as they saw themselves responding to all round pressure between two rationalities: the technical economical rationality and the value-oriented rationality. Another explanation may be that the members did not tell us that our project was not interesting, and, for that reason, they withdrew from it.

As researchers, we had to be sensitive to the line managers and their advisors to secure our legitimacy and have access to the Bank, as well as to conduct our research in accordance with ethical research guidelines. The two PhD students were tasked with securing data, and this required manoeuvring between the line managers and the project group. We had ongoing discussions about our role and the themes of our project to ensure that the seminars would take place as a means of collecting important data. As Huzzard, Ahlberg, and Ekman (2010) emphasise, action researchers need to be boundary experts. In our project, we did not manage to be third parties researchers or members; instead, we contributed to the life of the organisation with our arguments and theories, as argued by Larrea (2019). We took a position that values critical thinking as a way to improve the society, inspired by the thinking of Habermas (Kemmis 2001; Habermas 1990). From an ethical perspective, we created challenges for line managers as we brought forward alternative thinking in the Bank without the necessary dialogue with senior management. Our actions were based on the fact that we as researchers are normative in the way we address topics. The following questions arise for action researchers and how we should deal with our normativity. Should we proceed with our normativity or is it possible to negotiate and find 'common ground'? Other possibilities involve either confronting stakeholders, or proceeding didactically thoughtfully.

Conclusions

In this article, we started out with the following research question: What are the challenges of initiating an action research project in a financial organisation with top-down control that uses the BSC?

The findings revealed that, even if an action research project in a financial organisation has the financial backing of that organisation and its vision statements state that such learning is valuable, there are still challenges ahead. Management trends, such as performance management through the BSC and top-down senior management control, may unintentionally hinder the possibilities for proceeding with action research projects. Senior management strategies that demand control and efficiency allow little room in organisations for working with empowerment and critical reflection. Senior management will also have problems actually understanding the concept of action research if they do not participate in the processes.

In this case, we thought that we had a mission in initiating action learning seminars for line managers, and so we introduced theories about emotions and empowerment to investigate organisational practices with a view to improving them. However, the strategy of promoting such critical thinking created difficulties for the line managers involved, and they exited the project. The line managers found it difficult to explain to other colleagues and senior management what they learned from action learning as it essentially opposed the Bank's strategical use of performance measurement. The action research project may have made the line managers more stressed as we identified problems without providing them with the means to solve them or the power to make real strategical changes in the organisation. Thus, action researchers should avoid initiating action research projects without concrete dialogue and participation from the senior management. Even if verbal backing is given, the findings from this project revealed, actual support through action is needed, and senior management must be receptive to critical reflection – these are essential factors for succeeding with action research projects in organisations.

Action researchers also need to set aside time to establish 'common ground' and common goals between researchers and the different stakeholders in the organisation at the beginning of such projects, in line with transdisciplinary research (Fam and O'Rourke *In press*; Stokols 2006). Such processes need to involve dialogues that clarifies to which extent it is possible to explicitly establish a 'common ground' during the contracting phase or during the project planning and preparation stage. The work also needs to address if it is possible to establish 'common ground' in environments where an action research attitude is unfamiliar. However, as change processes require time and dialogue, a common ground could potentially be reached in later stages. This gives us several options; refraining from such cooperation or; attempting to cautiously, gradually, introduce critical thinking. Action researchers could simply offer a different view on the topics under discussion with the intention of inducing debate.

Single case studies have limitations in respect to generalisations (Yin 2009); however, the results from this study indicate a need for more research and attention to the context and role of senior management and the use of performance measurement in organisations that want to initiate action research projects. In line with Hackman (2009), our study demonstrates the importance of context and systemic dynamics for action research

projects. The role of senior management is strongly linked to the context and can be seen as a symptom which reflects the underlying dynamics.

Note

1. Quotations from these participants are presented as *HR manager* in the article to ensure anonymity.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Bank for financing this project and giving us access to its most important assets, its line managers and employees. We owe special thanks to an anonymous referee, whose insightful comments improved the discussion and conclusion section.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the case Bank.

Authors' contributions

YA is the first author and made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the paper and the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data. YA also wrote the manuscript.

TT contributed to applying for the funding for the project and was the project leader.

OAT and TT made substantial contributions to the acquisition and interpretation of data. OAT and TT have been involved in revising the manuscript to ensure its intellectual content.

All the authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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